

# The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative

## Focus Group Report

*Follow-Up with 2009 Summit Attendees*

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Prepared for:



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## **Background**

In October of 2005, under the leadership of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, 25 community leaders participated in an initial training session conducted by the National Fatherhood Initiative. This training set the planning stage for the development of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI) and the establishment of the first Fatherhood Summit in the City of Milwaukee in October of 2006. The MFI is designed to provide support, resources, education, and assistance to fathers in the City of Milwaukee. Its primary goal is to promote responsible fathering in the lives of Milwaukee children by addressing the issue of absentee fathers.

## **The Milwaukee Fatherhood Summits**

For the past four years, the Fatherhood Summit has been the centerpiece of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative. The goal of the annual summit is to bring together the Milwaukee community to generate support for fathers, provide resources for men, and address specific issues of fatherhood in the community. Each year, the two-day summits have focused on the key areas considered by the MFI and by men who have attended previous summits to be vital for successful fatherhood: health, employment, child support debt reduction, and driver's license recovery. Summit participants have an opportunity to receive free services or assistance in each of these core components, attend workshops, hear national and local speakers, and visit resource exhibitors. The theme of the 2009 summit was "Empowering Fathers for Leadership".

Since 2007, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc., has conducted an evaluation of the MFI. The Planning Council is a private, nonprofit research and planning organization. The agency's mission is to advance community health and human services through objective planning, evaluation, and research. The Planning Council's major focus has been to facilitate and summarize feedback from participants in the MFI's annual summits.

## **Feedback from Participants at the 2009 Summit**

The Planning Council recently completed a report summarizing feedback from individuals who attended the 2009 Fatherhood Summit ("The 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, Feedback Results from Summit Participants, Final Report"). The report documented the feedback attendees provided while at the summit, using surveys and workshop evaluation forms. The Planning Council also described the number and demographic characteristics of people who attended the summit.

A total of 950 individuals registered for the summit, including both online and on-site registrants, and 700 of those who registered were documented as having attended the summit. Most of the individuals who attended the 2009 summit were newcomers.

The vast majority of 2009 summit participants who completed a feedback survey rated the summit very highly. Overall, 98.5% rated the event as "outstanding" or "good". Almost all agreed or strongly agreed that the summit addressed important issues, offered potential solutions for fatherhood challenges, and provided useful information and materials.

When asked to describe the most important aspect of the summit, respondents noted that the summit was not only interesting and practical, but that it also provided a sense of unity, empowerment, and inspiration around fatherhood.

## Present Report

To expand on the feedback received from participants at the 2009 summit, the MFI asked the Planning Council to conduct follow-up focus groups with summit participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore: 1) what benefits summit attendees received from the summit, 2) the ways in which attendees used the experience of attending the summit and integrated what they had learned into their roles as fathers (e.g., followed through with next steps regarding child support debt, reinstatement of driver's license, finding employment; changes in their relationships with their children; etc.), and 3) participant suggestions for future summits.

This report summarizes feedback from two focus groups conducted with a small convenience sample of men, most of whom had attended the 2009 Fatherhood Summit and who received direct service assistance during the event.<sup>1</sup> The viewpoints in this report are limited to the thoughts and opinions of the small number of focus group participants (N=11) and are not presented as representative of those who attended the 2009 summit. Nonetheless, the issues and themes discussed provide some insight into the experiences of those who attended the 2009 summit.

## Methodology

To support participant recruitment, the Planning Council, in cooperation with the MFI, developed a postcard inviting summit attendees to participate in one of two focus groups scheduled approximately six months after the 2009 summit was held. The MFI mailed the postcards to a subset of 100 people who had attended the 2009 summit. Due to limited space, individuals were asked to pre-register for the focus groups. Because of a low initial response rate to the postcard invitation, Planning Council staff made follow-up phone and email contact with the individuals targeted for recruitment.

Both focus groups were held at St. Marcus Lutheran Church, located in Milwaukee's Near North Side and the same location as the 2009 Fatherhood Summit. According to the feedback from surveys received at the 2009 summit, participants found this to be a convenient location. Both focus groups were held on Saturday, April 10th, 2010, with the first session held at 10:00 a.m. and the second held at 1:00 p.m. Both sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes. As an incentive for participating, the MFI provided refreshments. Participants were also entered into a drawing to win tickets to a Milwaukee Brewers baseball game.

Both of the focus groups were conducted by an Associate Planner at the Planning Council, and documented by an Assistant Planner and a student intern; MFI staff were also present. The Planning Council, with support from the MFI, developed questions to loosely guide focus group participants in a conversation (see Appendix A). The discussion centered on four major areas:

1. Participants' reasons for attending the 2009 summit;
2. The context surrounding participants' experiences of the summit;
3. The benefits of attending the 2009 summit; and
4. Suggestions for improvements for future summits.

Participants were also asked to provide basic demographic and background information at the outset of both groups.

Detailed notes from the two focus groups were reviewed using qualitative analytic techniques. Key themes were manually coded and relevant quotes related to those themes were identified.

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<sup>1</sup> At least one of the focus group participants had not actually attended the 2009 Fatherhood Summit, but came to the focus group because of his interest in the issues.

## Focus Group Results

### Focus group participants

A total of 19 men initially signed up to attend the two focus groups; ten for the first session and nine for the second session. Eleven men ultimately participated in the two focus groups, with eight in attendance at the first session and three in attendance at the second session.<sup>2</sup>

Demographic and background information was captured using a brief survey (see Appendix B). Information was available for all 11 men, although several surveys were not filled out completely.<sup>3</sup> Ten of the 11 participants were fathers, with most fathers having between three and five children.<sup>4</sup> All of the participants who responded identified themselves as African American and most reported that they were over 40 years of age.<sup>5</sup> At the time the focus groups were held, three participants reported being employed, while six indicated that they were not employed (and two declined to answer). Most of the participants had attended the 2009 Fatherhood Summit, and three indicated that they had also attended previous summits.

### Participants' reasons for attending the 2009 summit

The reason most often cited for attending the 2009 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit was to receive assistance to address a particular problem. Specifically, men most often mentioned that they were seeking assistance with child support issues. For example:

“I was having a dispute with my child support situation, and the lady at the child support agency, the sister was real nice, she told me that the MFI was having an initiative in a few months. She was willing to help me attend.”

“I attended last year because a child support agent told me about the program so I came down to talk about the child support.”

Other areas for which participants were seeking assistance included: reinstating a license, being able to financially provide for their children, and finding resources on rearing their children.

In addition to their interest in receiving assistance, focus group participants attended the 2009 summit because they had been asked by someone to attend or had heard about the summit, either by word-of-mouth or through an advertisement on the radio. Another participant spoke about his own positive experience with a past summit, which prompted him to attend the 2009 summit. He said:

“None of the services really affected me, but I came to see where it grew from the first time I came. It became a point where I ran into a lot of old friends; they were doing good things and I wanted to join.”

### Context surrounding participants' experiences of the summit

Throughout both focus group sessions, participants spoke at length about the context surrounding their experiences of the summit, both prior to the summit and in the months that have followed. Primarily, comments centered around a deep mistrust of service systems; system bias against men; problems with child support; problems with other systems and issues; problems that stem from the interconnectedness of systems; and a sense of hopelessness. Each of these themes is described in more detail below.

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<sup>2</sup> Of those who pre-registered for the focus groups, six attended. Five participants were walk-ins the day of the focus group.

<sup>3</sup> Two surveys were missing information about employment status, and one survey was missing information about number of children, ethnicity, and whether or not he had attended more than one summit.

<sup>4</sup> Three participants had 1-2 children, five participants had 3-5, one had more than 5 children, and one declined to answer.

<sup>5</sup> Two of the participants reported being 30 years of age or younger, two were 31-40 years old, and seven reported being over 40 years of age.

### ***A mistrust of systems***

Overall, focus group participants seemed to have a deep mistrust of the systems with which they interface. The “system” was described as being comprised of “the biggest crooks in the world,” as being divisive towards men and women, and as only being interested in working with those who have money or power. As said by one participant:

“Only way somebody gonna roll with us so we stop dreaming is if we got plenty of money behind us, more than what they getting downtown. Until that day, they’ll be downtown; it’ll be a waste of our time.”

Some comments indicated that the men perceive the services that are intended to help them as primarily benefiting the agency that provides the services instead. For example, participants noted:

“The money is for us, but how do we benefit? We just talking about the same situation and there ain’t nothing getting done. Where are we?”

“A lot of programs are after numbers and they treat you [black men] like cattle so that they can go back out and get more money.”

Although not explicitly stated by many participants, there was a sense that the various systems with which participants interfaced were biased against or less responsive to African Americans. This contributed to the mistrust that participants expressed towards systems.

In contrast to their general mistrust of the service systems, focus group participants seemed to trust the MFI. As one participant put it:

“You guys just wasn’t after numbers. [...] But it didn’t feel like we were being used. I thank God for that.”

### ***System bias against men***

Beyond the general mistrust expressed, participants generally perceived systems to be biased against men. One participant called Wisconsin “a female state”, with custody automatically given to women, and men forced to fight for custody of their children. Others talked about the amount of support that women receive from the government in assisting them with finding employment and providing them with loans for cars and subsidies for housing. Participants contrasted this apparent abundance of resources for women with the lack of resources for men and with the expectation that men pay child support. One participant felt it was unfair that his ex-wife earned almost twice his income, but he was expected to pay her child support.

### ***Problems with child support***

One of the systems with which participants reported particular problems was the child support system. Many participants had concerns about the amount of money that men are required to pay towards child support, and what that means for them in terms of their quality of life. Two participants shared the following:

“They were taking out so much child support I could barely live. [...] I knew the more I worked the more they would take. [...] Before they took so much it kept me in arrears anyway. [...] For me it was like, it was so foggy. I just knew I was gonna die with that debt on me unless I hit the lottery and I don’t play the lottery.”

“[The child support system] doesn’t think about the cost of housing, light bills, transportation, eating, dude I gotta eat. [...] Before I see one dime, 44.4% of my check it taken out. That’s how much the state and child support is getting out after I work six

days a week for 12 hours a day. Now tell me how I have time to take care of my kids. [...] When am I gonna sleep?"

Concerns were also raised about the way in which child support is calculated, which was generally viewed as unfair to men. For example, one participant said:

"They forecast how much income you can make and the number of kids you have. They based it on what I could have made; lawyers said that I had the potential to make \$70,000 a year. [...] The ability to pay and having it in your pocket is two different things. It's like saying, I know him and he could pay me. In real life that wouldn't hold up, but here it does."

Participants also described experiencing frustration with owing the State of Wisconsin money for child support, even when other arrangements had been made with the child's mother. For example:

"You could have a perfect harmony relationship with the mother. The mom can say that you don't owe me, but the state might say you owe her thousands."

One participant said that he paid child support directly to his child's mother and therefore decided not to pay the State of Wisconsin. However, he had made this decision without fully understanding the ramifications and reportedly ended up owing the State thousands of dollars long after his children were grown.

### ***Problems with other systems and issues***

Child support was not the only issue that participants described as problematic. Other challenges participants described as facing men in the community included:

- Employers who will not hire men who have been out of the workforce for six months or longer and employers who will not hire felons;
- Court systems that could help men by clearing their criminal records or judges who are inconsistent in their rulings (e.g.: "Kids at UWM sell drugs and they get a slap on the wrist because it might mess up their future; if a 14-15 year old boy in the neighborhood did it, he'd be in jail. We need some judicial system consistency.");
- Receiving mixed messages from different professionals and not knowing who to believe;
- Not being able to receive needed information and having to go to Madison to settle disputes;
- Not being able to receive particular services because of where they live; and
- Anticipating the new law that will go into effect in June requiring all drivers to have car insurance, potentially resulting in men in their community being sent to jail.

Frustrations were also voiced about problems occurring on a city level, noting that Milwaukee has some of the highest rates of unemployment, foreclosures, and teenage pregnancy. Participants perceived there to be a lack of action to address these and other issues that disproportionately affect members of their community.

### ***System intersections***

Participants also articulated the many ways in which their problems with the various systems are interconnected; one problem will often lead to additional issues. For instance, men said that if they lose their jobs, they cannot pay child support, and by not paying child support they may have their driver's license revoked; without a license, it is a challenge to find work, and so on. Another focus group participant noted that by not paying child support, men may go to jail and

be charged with a felony, thus making them even less employable. Yet another participant said that if men get behind on their child support payments, their failure to pay is reflected on their credit ratings which may also hinder their employability. Overall, participants described these and other system coordination challenges, and the problems and inconveniences that this causes for men.

Though the interconnectedness of issues was raised, some had the sense that most of the problems stem from child support. For example:

“Child support is the focus. It’s the barrier for everything. If we don’t pay child support then everything is lost.”

“So I had to go to the DMV and it was this loop; they kept saying everything went back to child support, but child support had a lien on my license so there was no way around that. A judge said to release the lien immediately. The state said they needed child support to do something in their database. This was an electronic database, but the systems weren’t talking to each other.”

### ***Feelings of hopelessness***

With the many issues that participants spoke of facing, it was not surprising that they also described a sense of hopelessness. One man said, and other participants agreed, that:

“It does something to you psychologically, spiritually, physiologically.”

### **Benefits of attending the 2009 summit**

For focus group participants, the 2009 summit seemed to serve as an opportunity to address some aspects of these contextual and systems issues. Specifically, the services offered reportedly enabled participants to make pragmatic progress on some of their system-related problems (e.g., child support). In addition, for some participants the summit provided recognition of and validation for the system-related challenges that they were experiencing.

As a result, some focus group participants emphasized that they experienced considerable personal benefits and a sense of hope from having attended the summit. For example:

“The MFI saved my life. [...] They open up doors that I could never have opened.”

“I’ve been able to tell other men that are out there that I’ve been lost and that the water is real over here. It’s a way out.”

In addition to these overarching benefits, participants noted more specific benefits they experienced both during and after the summit, including: pragmatic benefits; receiving information, resources, and inspiration; and connecting with other men.

### ***Pragmatic benefits***

Focus group participants cited a number of substantial, pragmatic changes that they were able to make in their lives as a result of having attended the summit. One significant change for participants was related to reductions in child support interest owed to the State of Wisconsin. One participant noted having \$4,000 taken off of his debt and another reported that his debt was reduced from \$70,000 to \$20,000. This particular focus group participant said that he worked out a payment plan that would enable him to have his debt paid off in two years. He described how he felt after his debt was reduced:

“Now I’m going towards the end of the rainbow. Everything changed, man, when I walked out this door; the weight was right off of me. Well, actually, it was when I got a

letter in the mail confirming it; without the letter it was just talk. I saw my check and I saw that they didn't rip it up into tiny little pieces and I was like wow."

Participants were able to make progress in other financial aspects of their lives as well. For example, one participant said he was offered a job as a result of the summit. Another said the summit connected him as a single parent to W2 and he described the cumulative benefit of that connection in this way:

"I have an income now, W2. Even though it's through the State, I have an income for the kids to make sure they have everything that they need and I can pay off some of the debt that had started to incur. I started to make a lot of changes that I'm starting to see. W2 has helped with training for job searching and resume building. I've gotten a lot more hits back and feedback on resumes I put out."

Finally, another participant said he was given information about a tutor for his daughter at the summit, and, as a result, her grades have improved from a D to a B+.

### ***Receiving information, resources, and inspiration***

Focus group participants also valued and saw as beneficial the information, resources, and inspiration they received from the summit's workshops, guest speaker, and other services offered. For instance, some participants found George Foreman's keynote address about his own father to be moving and inspirational. Other participants spoke of specific workshops that were particularly useful to them. The workshops that were highlighted by participants included those related to: how to be a good father even in the absence of one, the need for women to take responsibility for their actions (rather than blaming men), fiscal responsibility, and motivating men to get physically fit and healthy. One participant said:

"There was such a broad spectrum of learning in the classes."

Participants also seemed to appreciate the wide range of resources and information available, and found that the information they received and contacts they made have continued to be useful to them. For instance:

"I was able to network with different people. I was able to get numbers and get information off some of the things that they do. It helped me confirm things that were already told to me and be able to put myself in a position to actually make a change to some of the things that were affecting me."

"I got some vital info and will continue to use it. My daughter is 15 and is reaching puberty. I have been relating information to my daughter on birth control and different prevention methods and other things in that area."

"I think everything that I attended had vital information. A lot of things were confirmed for me and it was info that I got and I utilized. I utilized all of it."

### ***Connecting with other men***

Participants emphasized the value of having the opportunity to connect with other men and other fathers, and of being encouraged to connect in a different way than they might otherwise do in their day-to-day lives. Many comments were made about the summit allowing for mutual support and sharing among men in a positive environment. For example:

"I met up with a lot of people I hadn't seen in awhile. There were lots of brothers of the struggle. I had a ball; it was a good lunch. It was good to see men coming together, and not over trouble."

“There are males and there are men. It’s good to see men. Males are all about me, me, I, I, what are you gonna do for me; they never admit when they’re wrong. I used to be that but I’m a man now. A man takes responsibility for himself, his family and his neighborhood. I needed to know what to do to make it right. It’s good to meet others out here that are men.”

Participants also reported experiencing a sense of commonality and validation in coming together with other men who are having similar experiences. For instance:

“It made me feel good once I did attend it. It was good to see that I’m not the only male person out here going through what I’m going through.”

“Then you don’t feel as bad when you know that people are carrying a whole lot more weight than you are carrying.”

Participants also focused on the benefit of being around other men who were talking about the importance of fatherhood, and the considerable role that fathers play in their children’s lives. For instance, one focus group participant said:

“It was great having us brothers come together and say we actually need to put our kids in check; sometimes it takes a man to do that.”

Though participants generally seemed to appreciate the opportunity of having men come together in a positive way, a few expressed skepticism about these connections. One said:

“When it come to black people, we cannot trust one another because we think everything is a hustle. Black men can’t connect.”

### ***Relationships with children and with children’s mothers***

Focus group participants were also asked to describe the ways in which attending the summit may have impacted their relationships with their children. In general, the men who participated in the focus groups described having positive relationships with their children, and therefore, said that the 2009 summit did not influence the way they interact with their children. Many of the men seemed to be very active in their children’s lives. Knowing what it was like to grow up without a father, participants described wanting to be involved in their children’s lives and being motivated to be there for their children. A few of the comments were as follows:

“I can’t see a difference. Me and my son hang out regularly anyway. He’s my main man. I can’t say the summit changed our relationship because we hang out all the time, but I did enjoy the summit.”

“I knew how hard it was without my pops. So I took the initiative. I even told my baby mama I don’t play those games. I told her I’ll go to court to see my baby if I need to. I’m not gonna say forget it.”

“I have constant contact with all my children so it’s really never been like I’m here one minute and I’m not the next.”

Focus group participants were also asked to describe any changes they may have experienced in their relationships with their children’s mothers. Participants seemed to agree that these relationships have been fairly consistent over time. Some said that nothing changed because there were no improvements needed in the relatively positive relationships they had with their children’s mothers. Others described somewhat entrenched conflicts that would not be expected to change from attending a two-day summit. Men who reported having contentious relationships with their children’s mothers cited long-standing disputes (e.g., mothers who threatened to call the authorities and have them arrested if they were delinquent on their child support payments, mothers who refused to let them see their children, mothers who were uninvolved in the

children's lives themselves, etc.). Not surprisingly, the challenges of these more contentious relationships continued to exist for participants after the summit.

### **Suggestions for improvements for future summits**

Though focus group participants seemed to be very satisfied with the 2009 fatherhood summit, when asked they were able to generate ideas about how to improve future summits. Many suggestions for improvement had to do with offering summits or other events that celebrated fatherhood more often. Men also were interested in more opportunities to learn from other men and to share their experiences with lawmakers and other decision makers. The remaining suggestions made by focus group participants tended to be about specific improvements to the summit or ways to recruit men and advertise the summit. When talking about specific improvements, suggestions were made in four general areas: having additional information or services, bringing in specific speakers or speakers who could address specific topics, connecting men with more job resources, and addressing other issues that fathers face.

#### ***Having summits or other events more often***

One of the suggestions made by focus group participants was to offer summit services or host other groups more often. One participant said that he has told other men of his positive experiences with the summit and they then ask him when the next summit will be held. Other participants agreed that services should be offered more frequently, but they did not necessarily feel that they had to be full, two-day summits. Instead, they suggested that the MFI host group meetings to supplement the annual summit. For example, one participant suggested including children in group discussions or having more social outings, like a picnic on Father's Day.

#### ***Learning from other men and talking to decision makers***

Throughout the focus groups, men described specific issues with which they were struggling. Often, other men in the focus group who had experienced similar challenges offered suggestions of what worked for them. For instance, during the groups men gave other participants information about local agencies that can help with weatherization, employment, and legal advice. Others spoke about how to reduce child support interest owed to the State, and one participant volunteered to talk at a future summit about how to navigate the court system and help men obtain visitation rights for their children. When asked if focus group participants thought that men would like a forum to come together at a future summit and discuss these issues and share ideas, men generally agreed that this would be useful. However, one participant also said:

“We need to talk to a higher power, not each other. We all know where we stand in here.”

Consistent with this perspective, focus group participants suggested that it would be useful to have legislators and decision makers at future summits to hear men's stories, understand men's experiences, and hear about the kinds of systemic challenges that men face. Participants made summit-related suggestions as well as more far-reaching recommendations to assist decision makers in understanding men's experiences. For example:

“One way you can package this for this year is to get five or six judges and commissioners down here and let them hear us. Let us ask them some questions. What if they was in my shoes? Would they still lock me up? [...] We need these people to come out here to feel our pain. We need them to come down here from River Hills; come down from 79th and Center.”

“Let's switch the worlds we live in so they can feel what we're going through. Come to my world; see what I go through.”

“What you mention is so true. Put a few aldermen in the county jail cells. When they experience it, they will try to change the system. But until then, they’ll say, ‘oh, they’re okay.’”

### ***Having additional information or services***

Suggestions were made for future summits to have more information available regarding the services that various community agencies offer. Specifically, participants suggested that it would be helpful to invite representatives from agencies like the NAACP, Justice 2000, and Legal Aid to discuss what services are available through their agencies. In addition, participants suggested that the summit include information about the court system and information about how the justice system as a whole operates. Finally, participants indicated that it would be helpful to introduce people to the many online resources available in the community, and to provide training at a future summit to those who do not know how to navigate the Internet.

### ***Bringing in specific speakers or speakers who could address specific topics***

Focus group participants generally valued George Foreman’s keynote address, and suggested including other “big name” speakers (e.g., Bill Cosby). One participant suggested bringing in speakers to specifically emphasize the detrimental impact that drugs have on the black community. He said: “It’s almost like mass genocide to our people.”

Another suggestion from participants was to have men who had experienced hardships speak to how they overcame those obstacles, to empower other men and encourage them to do the same. One focus group participant explained it this way:

“Bring in speakers that know from experience. Then people can relate to how to change their lives. They are good examples because they can tell you ‘I was there and this is what I was. This is how I changed my life now you can change yours.’ It’s not that we didn’t want to get out of the room, but we didn’t know where the door was.”

### ***Connecting men with more job resources***

Some suggestions from participants focused on making improvements to the MFI’s Community Job Fair. Participants suggested that it would be helpful to have more employers at the fair, particularly those who would be willing to hire felons and those who would pay employees for training. There was an interest among some participants in having the MFI consider building strong connections with employers, and linking men who are good workers to those employers. Additional information about job training and education was also suggested, as well as opportunities for career assessments or career building. Finally, there was a recommendation that the job fair be offered on both days of the summit. One participant suggested that if employers were unable to attend on a Saturday, they could leave information regarding job openings, what they entail, and how much they pay so that Saturday attendees would have access.

### ***Addressing other issues that fathers face***

Other ideas participants shared included expanding future summit offerings beyond the four key components that have been included in the past (i.e., jobs, health, driver’s license recovery, and child support dept reduction). Specifically, there was some interest in addressing other key areas that fathers face such as: assisting fathers and children with education; helping with mortgages; offering confidence workshops and trainings on “morals, responsibility, and accountability;” and hosting discussions about “criminal thinking and anger management.”

### ***Improved recruitment strategies***

Summit recruitment was another area in which focus group participants offered suggestions. Participants had various thoughts about how to get the word out about future summits. Suggestions included: enlisting the help of churches, social service agencies, and other fathers to let more in the community know about the summit and/or sponsoring more advertisements on radio and television.

There was some discussion in the focus groups about generational differences between men, and the need to recruit and engage young men in future summits. One participant advised the MFI to:

“Be more creative to attract young male fathers. I didn’t see any males under my age on Saturday. I’m 27. There are a lot of teenagers and early adults in their 20s that should have been there.”

Focus group participants hypothesized that young men may be too embarrassed to seek out help. Therefore, it was suggested that the MFI might need different recruitment strategies for different age groups of men, with an emphasis on de-stigmatizing seeking out assistance.

Participants indicated that effective messages for publicity and recruitment would focus on explaining and highlighting what the summit can do for men. For instance:

“Show people who have been helped [by the summit] and where they were and where they are now.”

“If you want them to come, you’ve gotta say that it’s going to help them financially. Show them that it helps them financially. Open the door for them; you’ll need to take the doors off the hinges because there will be so many men here. Don’t give out money, but show them how they can get money or reduce their debts. I went from owing \$70,000 to \$20,000!”

Focus group participants also spoke about the importance of the MFI gaining men’s trust as a way of encouraging men to attend a summit. A few comments clearly illustrate this:

“Brothers are tired of being used. We are used as a scapegoat to get funding.”

“You think the summit is just another program; it’s like going to get a colonoscopy and it’s like (haha) we are a bunch of men and we’re gonna get shot through this thing. But I got a chance to meet some men that were looking for a way up and a way out.”

It seemed as though focus group participants who attended the summit did trust the MFI. Therefore, asking men who have attended previous summits to be ambassadors for future summits may be a successful recruitment strategy. Focus group participants had already done information recruitment of their own accord, and seemed to recognize the value of men giving testimonials about how the summit helped them and letting other men know that the MFI and the summit are trustworthy resources.

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Limitations and Evaluation Recommendations**

The Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit is an annual event sponsored by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI). The goal of the annual summit is to bring together the Milwaukee community to generate support for fathers, provide resources for men, and address specific issues of fatherhood in the community. The theme of the 2009 Fatherhood Summit was “Empowering Fathers for Leadership.” As a follow-up to the evaluation of the 2009 summit, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. conducted two focus groups with a small convenience sample of summit attendees.

The goals of the focus groups were to explore: 1) what benefits summit attendees received from the summit, 2) the ways in which summit attendees utilized the experience of attending the summit and integrated what they had learned into their roles as fathers, and 3) participant suggestions for future summits.

A total of 11 men participated in two focus groups; only one of the men was not a father. Half of the men who had children reported having 3-5 children, and most of the participants were over 40 years of age. Most of the focus group participants identified themselves as African American, and approximately half reported being unemployed. Only three participants reported having attended more than one summit and it is believed that at least one of the focus group participants did not attend the 2009 summit.

### **Summary**

Reasons given by focus group participants for attending the 2009 summit included:

- Seeking out assistance to address a particular problem, including reducing child support interest debt, reinstating a license, and finding resources to provide for children.
- Interest generated by word-of-mouth or advertising on the radio.

Participants spoke at length about the larger context surrounding their experiences of the summit, both prior to the summit and in the months that followed. In describing that context, focus group participants spoke passionately about their perspectives, including:

- A deep mistrust of service systems.
- A system viewed as biased against men.
- Problems working with child support and other systems and issues.
- Problems stemming from the interconnectedness of systems.
- A sense of hopelessness and helplessness in the face of these systemic issues.

It was obvious that focus group participants experienced multiple challenges in their lives. The MFI's 2009 summit seemed to serve as an opportunity to address some aspects of these contextual issues and/or to receive validation of them. Specifically, men described:

- Pragmatic benefits received as a result of the summit (e.g., having thousands of dollars of child support interest debt forgiven, being offered a job, being connected to W2 income, finding a tutor for a child, etc.).
- Continuing to use the information and resources they received after the two-day summit.
- The importance of having a place where they could come together with other men who were attempting to work through similar hardships.

In general, the men who participated in the focus group described having positive relationships with their children. As a result, the summit simply served to reinforce their commitment to being engaged in the lives of their children. Participants reported that their relationships with their children's mothers ranged from positive co-parenting to long-standing, contentious struggles. Neither type of relationship would be expected to change as a result of a two-day summit and participants confirmed that this was the case.

Overall, focus group participants seemed to be very satisfied with the 2009 fatherhood summit. However, when asked for suggestions, participants offered several ideas for improvement, including:

- Holding summits or other events more often than once a year.

- Providing more opportunities to learn from other fathers who had overcome challenges.
- Inviting decision makers to hear men's stories and experiences.
- Including additional information and resources (e.g., information about service agencies, the criminal justice system, navigating the internet, etc.).
- Including more employment and job training resources.
- Bringing in big-name speakers or speakers who could address particular issues.
- Addressing other issues that fathers face, (e.g., education, housing, confidence issues, responsibility, anger management, etc.).

Additionally, focus group participants offered many suggestions around recruitment strategies. Specifically, they suggested:

- Getting the word out about the summit by enlisting the help of pastors, social service agencies, and/or fathers who have attended past summits.
- Generating different recruitment strategies for different age groups of fathers, and particularly for young men.
- Highlighting the pragmatic benefits of the summit, perhaps through testimonials.
- Continuing to gain men's trust and capitalizing on the trust that has already been developed.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the focus groups provided further support for and deepened the conclusions from the onsite evaluation of the 2009 Fatherhood Summit. Summit participants clearly valued the event, and found it useful and relevant to their lives. Those who participated in the focus groups were able to cite substantial pragmatic outcomes they achieved from having attended the summit (e.g., reductions in child support interest) and also articulated more intangible benefits from having been part of the experience as a whole (e.g., inspiration, hope, and a sense of fellowship). Focus group participants also spoke passionately about the larger life context that surrounded their experiences of the summit, and seemed to view the summit as an opportunity to address or affirm some of the challenges they experienced.

However, it was clear from both the onsite summit evaluations and the focus groups that participants were interested in additional support and resources. Participants also seemed to be interested in having more opportunities to connect with one another as men and as fathers, to share their stories, to identify ways to navigate various systems, and possibly to advocate for change. For example, at times the focus groups themselves spontaneously evolved into conversations that resembled a support group. Specifically, participants often described the challenges and issues with which they were struggling, with other participants validating those challenges and offering problem-solving strategies. This occurred most often when the conversation turned to systems-related issues, and particularly in relationship to the child support system.

The focus group participants expressed deep frustration with the child support system, and particularly with how child support is calculated and enforced. In response to data from previous summit evaluation reports and to the frustration they also heard from men, the MFI has developed a "Child Support 101" workshop, separate from the annual summit. This workshop extends and expands upon what occurs at the annual summit, and is designed to give participants a hands-on, behind-the-scenes perspective on the child support system. The workshop includes a tour of the Milwaukee County Department of Child Support Enforcement,

information about the legislative policy that governs child support enforcement, an opportunity to develop a personal connection with the child support staff, and time to address specific issues about participants' individual cases.

To date, the MFI has conducted two "Child Support 101" workshops (one in 2008 and one in 2010), with a total of 23 participants. Participants were asked to complete brief feedback forms prior to and after attending the workshop. Participant responses indicated that both the 2008 and the 2010 workshops were well received among those who attended. While those who participated in the 2008 workshop indicated that they felt that the child support system was unfair prior to attending the workshop, most expressed an increased understanding of the system and how their situation could be improved after completing the workshop. Results from the "pre" and "post" surveys completed by 2010 workshop participants suggested that the men generally had a more positive perception of the child support system and more hope that their own situation would improve after attending. Participants in the 2010 workshop also indicated that the workshop had provided useful information and assistance, and that they would use the information to improve their situation and/or share what they had learned with other men. Additional details on participant feedback regarding "Child Support 101" can be found in Appendix C.

Additional supports and events such as the "Child Support 101" workshop seem to fit with what summit attendees have requested. In both the onsite summit evaluations and the focus groups, participants suggested that the MFI offer summit services or host other groups related to fathering more often. The MFI's strategic plan includes increased father engagement in the management and governance of the organization, with an emphasis on supporting men's skill development and developing strategies for system change. This plan also includes pairing men with "empowerment coaches" to support and guide them as they take on additional responsibilities in the life of the MFI. These plans may provide the venue for father involvement and the opportunities for personal connection that focus group participants seem to be seeking.

### **Limitations and Evaluation Recommendations**

The approach of engaging summit attendees in follow-up focus groups yielded rich information, complementing the more quantitative and immediate feedback received from participants during the summit. However, this information was limited by the small number of focus group participants (N=11). The lessons learned from focus groups conducted previously with 2008 summit participants were taken into consideration when designing this year's focus group sessions. For instance, significant efforts were made to bolster and track participant recruitment efforts. Even with an intensive outreach strategy, Planning Council staff were unable to recruit more than ten people per session. If focus groups are to be conducted in the future, it is recommended that different approaches and/or models be explored. One suggestion would be to link the focus groups with an event that the MFI is hosting, like their "Child Support 101" workshop. Fathers may be more likely to attend a focus group if there is a concrete benefit for them in doing so. It was clear from the quantitative analysis that summit attendees were pleased with the location of the summit, which is why the focus groups were held at the same place. This should be taken into consideration when scheduling follow up sessions with summit attendees. However, modifications in other logistical aspects of the focus groups may be necessary (e.g., date and time held, incentives, etc.).

Alternatively, it may be beneficial to explore other methods of gathering follow-up information from summit attendees, such as key informant interviews, phone surveys, etc. By building on the successes of and lessons learned from the focus groups of the last two years, future follow-up efforts can continue to provide detailed, rich information about why people attend the MFI summits, what they find most useful, the personal outcomes achieved, and what can be improved.

## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions

- 1) Please introduce yourself and tell us briefly, why you decided to attend the 2009 Fatherhood Summit?
- 2) What was the most important thing that happened for you at the summit?
- 3) In the past five months, in what ways has your life benefited from having attended the summit?
  - a) What kinds of changes have there been in your life in the main areas addressed by the summit (child support, driver's license, job, health)?
  - b) What kinds of changes have there been in your relationship with your children (amount of contact, type of relationship, etc.)?
  - c) Was there something you learned at the summit that you have carried forward in your life?
- 4) What do you think can be done to make next year's summit even better?
  - a) What kinds of improvements could be made in how the summit is run?
  - b) What kinds of changes could be made in what the summit offers?
  - c) Are there other areas of assistance fathers could get support with that the summit could address (besides child support, driver's license, job, health)?
  - d) Any other kinds of changes you would suggest?
- 5) What can the MFI do to support the engagement of fathers in its work?
  - a) In what ways could fathers be more involved in the summit itself?
  - b) What roles could fathers play in the MFI as a whole?
- 6) Tell us about one challenge fathers in our community are facing and how the MFI might help with that challenge.



## Appendix B

### Focus Group Survey

#### Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative Focus Group Demographics Saturday, April 10, 2010

**Your Gender?**

- Male  
 Female

**Are you a Father/Mother?**

- Yes  
 No

**# of Children** \_\_\_\_\_

- N/A

**Are you Employed?**

- Yes  
 No

**Your Age?**

- Under 21 years of age  
 21 to 30 years of age  
 31 to 40 years of age  
 Over 40 years of age

**Your Ethnicity?**

- African American/Black  
 Hispanic/Latino  
 Native American  
 White/Caucasian  
 Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Have you attended more than one Fatherhood Summit?  Yes  No



## Appendix C

### Feedback from Participants in “Child Support 101”

Feedback that was gathered from attendees at previous Fatherhood Summits and from men who participated in follow-up focus groups suggested that many who attend the annual summit experienced a sense of frustration regarding their child support issues and the child support system in general. In response to this feedback, the MFI developed a “Child Support 101” workshop which is conducted independently from the annual Fatherhood Summit. The workshop is designed to give participants a hands-on, behind-the-scenes perspective on the child support system to deepen participants’ understanding of the function of the child support system and to provide direct assistance with participants’ child support cases.

The Child Support 101 workshop includes a tour of the Milwaukee County Department of Child Support Enforcement as well as information about the legislative policy that governs child support enforcement. In addition, the workshop affords men the opportunity to meet and develop a personal connection with child support enforcement staff and time to receive one-on-one assistance around their individual cases. To date, the MFI has conducted two Child Support 101 workshops, one in 2008 and one in 2010. A total of 13 men participated in the workshop held in 2008, and 10 men participated in the workshop held in 2010.

#### **Participant Feedback: 2008**

Participants in the 2008 workshop were asked to complete a brief feedback form after attending the workshop (N=13). The form included open-ended questions which asked participants to share what their perceptions of child support were prior to attending the workshop and to then indicate how they felt after having attended the workshop. Overall, the men who participated in the workshop noted that prior to attending the workshop, they felt that the child support system was generally unfair to men. Sample responses included:

“I feel that [child support is] a need for certain situations but for some like myself, I’ve always been active in all of my children’s lives since birth.”

“I feel that it’s unfair...I’m paying although I don’t have any way of seeing my kids.”

“...it is unfair to pay child support that goes to the mother when you never get to see the child and you will willingly support the child.”

“I felt that it doesn’t help men at all. The courts didn’t listen to me at all. They went completely with the mother.”

When asked about their feelings toward child support after having attended the workshop, some participants indicated that they had a better understanding of the system or of their own situation, and others indicated that they had received helpful assistance. Sample responses included:

“I have a lot of clarity now toward child support. I will tell other fathers to take the time out and come down and see how to settle their support.”

“I understand that there are ways to approach my issues and I plan to venture towards a better way.”

“I feel much better to know that there are people at least trying to help men in situations involving child support.”

“I feel better because I got results.”

## **Participant Feedback: 2010**

For the 2010 Child Support 101 workshop, participants were asked to complete a survey prior to attending the workshop and then to complete a similar survey after they had attended the workshop (N=10). The “pre” survey included general demographic questions as well as open-ended questions about what they hoped to get out of the workshop. It also asked participants to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with several items regarding their perceptions of the child support system and their own situation (using a 4-point rating scale, with 1 indicating strong agreement and 4 indicating strong disagreement). The “post” survey included the same items relating to their perceptions about child support and their situation (using the same 4-point scale) and also included open-ended questions about what they had learned from the workshop and how they would use that information going forward.

Information from the 2010 “pre” and “post” workshop surveys indicated that all of the individuals who attended the Child Support 101 workshop were men, all were over the age of 30, most identified themselves as African American (8 of 9 respondents), and approximately half were employed (5 of 9 respondents). Participants had a range of one to eight children, and most owed child support for each one of their children (6 of 9 respondents).<sup>6</sup>

Overall, responses to the surveys completed by 2010 workshop attendees indicated that the workshop was both helpful and informative for participants. In addition, after attending the workshop participants generally had a more positive perception of the child support system and more hope that their own situation would improve. Specifically, responses on the “pre” survey indicated that participants generally felt hopeless about their child support situation, that they would never catch up on their child support debt, that they couldn’t get help with their issues, and that they could not trust the child support system. However, after having attended the workshop, participants generally felt differently when responding to these same items. Specifically:

- Prior to attending the workshop, participants generally agreed with the statement, “I feel hopeless about my child support situation” (mean response=2.1), while participants generally disagreed with this statement after attending the workshop (mean=3.1).
- Prior to attending the workshop, participants generally agreed with the statement, “I feel like I will never catch up on my child support debt” (mean response=1.9), while participants generally disagreed with this statement after attending the workshop (mean=2.5).
- Prior to attending the workshop, participants generally agreed with the statement, “I don’t trust the system to help me with my child support issues” (mean response=2.3), while participants generally disagreed with this statement after attending the workshop (mean=3.1).
- Prior to attending the workshop, participants generally agreed with the statement, “I can’t get any help about my child support issues” (mean response=2.2), while participants generally disagreed with this statement after attending the workshop (mean=2.9).

While there was some shift in participants’ attitudes towards these items, the level to which they agreed or disagreed with other items on the “pre” and “post” surveys remained relatively unchanged. Specifically, both before and after attending the workshop, participants generally agreed that they knew what to do about their child support responsibilities (“pre” mean=2.0; “post” mean=1.5) and that they knew how much back child support they owed (“pre” mean=2.1; “post” mean=1.7). In addition, both before and after attending the workshop, participants generally did not feel like they were unable to have contact with their children because of their child support debt (“pre” mean=3.7; “post” mean=3.7). Also, both before and after attending the workshop,

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<sup>6</sup> Demographic information was unavailable for one participant.

participants generally did not feel that fear of being arrested for their debt was preventing them from seeking help from the child support enforcement office (“pre” mean=3.0; “post” mean=3.2).

When asked about the most important thing they learned from Child Support 101, participants in the 2010 workshop generally indicated that they had received information and assistance to help them meet their child support payments or to pay off their child support debt. Moreover, when asked how they would use what they learned from the workshop, some participants indicated that they would use the information to improve their situation, while others indicated that they would tell other men about the workshop and about what they had learned.

### **Summary**

Overall, feedback from participants in Child Support 101 suggested that both the 2008 and the 2010 workshops were well received among those who attended. While those who participated in the 2008 workshop indicated that they felt that the child support system was unfair prior to attending the workshop, most expressed an increased understanding of the system and how their situation could be improved after completing the workshop. Additionally, results from the “pre” and “post” surveys completed by 2010 workshop participants suggested that the men generally had a more positive perception of the child support system and more hope that their own situation would improve after attending. Participants in the 2010 workshop also indicated that the workshop had provided useful information and assistance, and that they would use the information to improve their situation and/or share what they had learned with other men.